

Quad-City Times

Hare, Braley split on extending job benefits

By Ed Tibbets

The Quad-Cities' two congressmen were on opposite sides Tuesday of a proposal to extend unemployment benefits by 13 weeks.

The U.S. House voted overwhelmingly, 331-83, to approve the extension. U.S. Rep. Phil Hare, D-Ill., backed the bill, but U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, voted against it, saying it was unfair to rural areas.

The bill would extend unemployment payments to 300,000 people in 18 states who are scheduled to exhaust their benefits soon.

Qualifying states are those whose jobless rates are at least 8.5 percent.

Iowa has a 6.8 percent unemployment rate, one of the lowest in the country. However, 32 counties, most of them rural, had jobless rates of 7.6 or higher in August, according to a chart supplied by Braley's office.

"That's a huge portion of our state," Braley said.

Nineteen counties in Iowa had jobless rates of at least 8.5 percent.

Backers of the extension said the 18 states it applies to have been hit hard by the recession, and that jobs are scarce there. With workers hit early on, their unemployment benefits are fast running out.

Unemployment rates in those states range from 8.6 percent in Wisconsin to 15.2 percent in Michigan.

"With the unemployment rate in Illinois at over 10 percent, it makes perfect sense to continue to provide unemployment benefits so ordinary people can pay their bills and hold onto their homes," Hare said.

Braley said he sympathized with workers in other states, but that Iowa is suffering, too. U.S. Reps. Leonard Boswell, D-Iowa, and Steve King, R-Iowa, voted against the bill. U.S. Rep. Tom Latham, R-Iowa, voted for it. U.S. Rep. Dave Loebsack, D-Iowa, did not vote.

Iowa's unemployment rate may be low - the spike in unemployment rates didn't start ramping up until the start of this year - but state officials say a growing number are exhausting their unemployment benefits, too.

Nearly 31,000 Iowans are expected to have run out of benefits by the end of the year, according to Iowa Workforce Development.

"The extension they're proposing in Congress will not help them," said Joe Bervid, legal counsel for the agency.

That may be more apparent in the Quad-Cities than in most places. People filing claims in the Illinois Quad-Cities would get extended benefits, while those filing just across the river would not.

There are exceptions.

For example, an Iowan laid off by an Illinois company would get an extension under the bill, while a neighbor would not if they happened to be let go from a company based in Iowa, Braley said.

His office said benefits are tied to the location of the employer.

The bill's costs are being funded by tightening rules to reduce overpayments and extending a federal unemployment tax on businesses of \$14 per worker.

The Senate has yet to act.